

BATTLE OF GRAND COTEAU.

The Story of a Rebel Dash After a Paymaster's Wagon and Other Spoils.

By PORTER D. LEARNARD, Co. E, 23d Wis.

I wish to recall to the memory of those now living of our old brigade the sharpest and fiercest battle we were in, for the time it lasted, and perhaps on record.

This battle is known in history as the battle of Grand Coteau, La., and it occurred Nov. 3, 1863. After our long and weary march from Milliken's Bend to Grand Coteau, La., and in the battles of Port Gibson, Raymond, and the charge at Vicksburg, May 22, with 41 days of experience in the rifle pits, on our return from Jackson we took a few weeks' rest until early in September, then embarked on a river transport farther south and went into camp at Carrollton, a suburb of New Orleans.

After a grand review Gen. Grant bade us adieu and departed for the East to assume command of the Potomac. Our corps (the Thirtieth) was then consolidated with the Nineteenth, under Gen. Franklin, in the Department of the Gulf, with Gen. Banks as Department Commander.

In October we started out on a campaign, marching from Brashear City in the direction of Alexandria. We marched for several days through a fine and beautiful country of level prairies, with occasional strips of timber along the streams, which afforded us good camping grounds with an abundance of wood and water.

On the night of Nov. 2 it was announced by our officers that our division would take a rest the next day and remain in camp, as the Paymaster H. A. Tenney, would be with us. We were glad to have a day's rest, and pleased to replenish our high empty wallets with some of Uncle Sam's greenbacks.

The day was as calm and beautiful as we ever saw, and we had no pretension of approaching danger. About 11 p. m. Capt. Jas. M. Bull commanded Co. E to "fall in," as we were the senior company, and were the first to be paid. Our return from the Paymaster's tent, John Callins, our cook, announced dinner. In the meantime the next company was marching to the Paymaster's tent.

Our cook asked, "Who will take some hot coffee out to the boys on the picket line?" As I had just hauled a pony from a plantation a few days before, I volunteered to go, thinking it a good chance to have a good ride. I did not wait to eat my dinner, but was helped on to my pony by one of the boys, and the cook handed me the pail of coffee.

I was cantering along, enjoying the ride, when, about half-way between camp and picket line, there sounded a sharp and tremendous volley of musketry at my right. Upon looking around, I saw the rebel infantry charging through the woods in all manner of shapes, in broken lines from four to six deep. They had captured our picket line on that side, thus preventing us from getting warning of the sudden attack.

Our brigade commander, Gen. S. G. Burbridge, as late appearing and dashing an officer as ever sat in a saddle, was on his horse in an instant, riding down the line, commanding his men to fall in. Our brigade, consisting of the 23d Wis., 7th Ill. and 83d Ohio, numbering about 1,200 men, with two pieces of artillery, grabbed their guns and rushed to the front in an instant to face an enemy of nearly 3,000, in an almost hand-to-hand conflict. Nearly every shot from our guns made a gap in the rebel ranks. The commanding officer of the enemy's force in front of our regiment told our Colonel that the first volley fired by our boys killed 54 of his men. On the following day we buried over 500 of their dead in one grave.

I will now relate my experience while on my way to the picket line on the left. Looking in that direction I saw our entire picket force coming in on me, and about 1,000 rebels circling around us, and as I did not feel very hungry at that moment, nor think the boys were thirsting for coffee, I dropped the pail, flew back to camp and slid off from my pony to get my knapsack, canteen, etc.

In the confusion of whistling bullets and general roar of musketry my pony became so excited I could not mount him without assistance, as there was no saddle on him; so I left him, picked up my things, and struck out for the rear on foot.

In the meantime, as luck would have it, our Wagon Master happened to have a team hitched up ready to go out foraging. The boys threw the Paymaster and his chest of greenbacks into that wagon in a hurry, and the driver lashed those poor mules on one side at every jump, while the Wagon Master piled his horse on the other side, riding his horse on a creaking log. The team flew past me so quick I could hardly see what it was at all, and the rebels did not get the Paymaster nor his greenbacks that trip.

I soon became exhausted, and could not get over the ground fast enough. As soon as I saw we were surrounded by the cavalry I threw away my things. They ordered Ben Dickinson and myself to surrender, which we readily did, and were marched off under guard. I did not relish the idea of having to walk all the way to Texas and remaining a prisoner for an indefinite length of time, so watched for a chance to escape, and in the meantime "played possum."

During the excitement and confusion, while they were capturing many more of our boys, I threw up my hands and fell forward on my face in the grass as though I had been shot. After a few moments I raised my head and saw many of our boys among whom was Dickinson, now being marched away. I remained quiet a while longer, when our Second Brigade came up on the double quick to reinforce us. They had been camped about two miles back of us.

A few volleys from them held the cavalry in check; however, they had time to raid our camp, burn our tents and make a clean sweep, not even our drums escaping, for they cut the heads off sick and dead.

With our reinforcements we pressed them back in the direction of Opelousas. We returned early in the evening, going into camp where the Second Brigade had camped the night before.

The roll call showed up for our regiment about 85, with about 300 killed, wounded and taken prisoners. We were a sorrowful looking lot of men, without food, shelter or blankets. We subsisted for several days upon anything we could lay hands on, not even corn cobs escaping us. We were in such a state that anything else we came in contact with, to build fires a few feet apart, and lay down between them on the ground to keep warm.

Our Colonel, J. G. Guppy, was wounded and a prisoner; our Captain and three other officers

were also prisoners. Our Surgeons arranged a hospital and cared for the wounded that night and the following day. Our boys who were taken prisoners were paroled after a few months and remained in parole camp at New Orleans for sometime before being exchanged, so it was nearly a year before their return to the regiment.

We soon learned the cause of that sudden and unexpected attack. There were two companies of the 1st La. Cav. with us, acting as scouts; three of them deserted our picket line at night, went over to the enemy's line and informed them of our strength and position and of the Paymaster's intended visit the following day.

In the Spring of 1861, while on that famous Red River campaign, we traveled over the same road and halted to rest on the same old battleground. With the events of that day fresh in our memories we took one last sad look at the little mounds that marked the resting places of the fallen ones, the Blue and the Gray, in that lonely spot on the banks of the Grand Coteau.

Our drum corps numbered but three drummers and two fifers after that battle. As Maj. Greene, then commanding the regiment, thought I was the best drummer left he put me in charge of the drum corps. I would sometimes forget the duties assigned to me and frequently missed beating the calls. I remember one day he sent the Sergeant Major after me, who informed me that Maj. Greene wished to see me and to report to him. When I called, he said:

"See here, Porter, you missed the sick call and Orderly's call to-day, and I had to send for you, and if you can not do better than this I shall have to stand you on the head of a barrel in front of my tent to punish you."

I did not wish that to occur and to be the laughing stock of all the boys, so I looked out that I made no failure to be on hand thereafter. The boys in our company named me "Old 76," as I was always with the regiment from the time we entered the service to the mustering out in 1865, putting in three years of continuous active campaign duty. My twin brother Perry and I were the two youngest soldiers in our regiment, being but 14 years eight months old when we enlisted.

"THE TEAM FLEW PAST ME."

Black Snake as Big as a Hog.

"The most wonderful den of snakes anywhere I guess," said Judge B. Jugg, "is the Snake Country," lies off to the south of old Steuben, in a big stretch of deep, dark woods in Potter County, Pa., known as the Black Forest. It is a black-southerner den, a never goes by that one or two immense blacksnakes are not overpowered by superior numbers of lumbermen or bark peelers over there, as they are always prowling about, and for us army men, and unsuspecting persons about. I don't suppose there is another spot on this continent where such monstrous blacksnakes are so numerous. I don't know what it is that makes them grow so big there, but my opinion is that the locality is so wild and hard to get at that the snakes have a disturbed opportunity to reach a patriarchal age and take on size with their years. I believe blacksnakes would get just as big elsewhere if they could only get the time.

"There is no doubt in my mind that some of those Black Forest serpents were born long before this country was settled, have seen them with their faces as wrinkled as a walnut and with long gray hair on their upper lips. My brother-in-law, Squire Hollis, of the old Steuben, told me that he had seen one that had a funny-looking lump on its side. He cut down into the lump six inches or so and found a flint arrowhead at the bottom of it. There could be but one explanation of the presence of that arrowhead there. The snake had been shot by an Indian some time. As there hadn't been any Indians hunting with bows and arrows in that country for about three generations, of course the snake must have been a lively native before the days of the white man thereabout, and nobody knows how many years before that, either. Squire Hollis is willing to bet that the snake was a good deal more than 100 years old, and it was as hale and hearty as a serpent could be."

"I say that Squire Hollis killed that snake, but that is hardly a correct statement. He was lumbering over in that region and had a lot of logs banked for rolling down a steep slope into the creek. Accidentally a log got loose, and away it went down-hill. It had gone some distance and had taken on tremendous momentum, when this snake came tearing out from some place where it had been hiding, and caught the log as it was on the flying log. There is no telling what the snake thought the log was, but he was evidently in a state of supreme fury at it, and caught the log, and, letting it that away without measuring it, he never could tell how long the serpent was. The Squire says, though, that if the snake could have been seasoned and sawed up it would have cut up into as nice a pile of 16-foot boards a foot and a half wide as anyone ever bought. 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